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ABSTRACT

A chronic problem in public relations education is the fragmentation of coursework, particularly as this fragmentation impacts on the application of communication theory. Public relations textbooks presentation of theory is often fragmented and segregated in to "theoretical" chapters and "applied" chapters with little integration between the two. Popular case study books reinforce a formulated problem-solving approach (such as the RACE formula) in examining case studies. Much of the class activity of a public relations cases course, restricted to graduating seniors, involves peer and instructor evaluation of the work of teams who examine and study case studies primarily from a textbook. At the end of the course, students present individually prepared case studies. The instructor observed that students were graduating from the program with little appreciation for how communication theory can serve as a critical tool of professional public relations practitioners. He added a requirement that students support their conclusions with communication theory. Once the students realized that the application of communication theory to case study analysis added a supportive dimension to their problem-solving recommendations, they began to enjoy the task of finding such supporting theories to lend credence to their recommendations. Student found themselves investing their research time in providing theoretical insights. Students, particularly those enrolled in the class the second summer the course was taught, thrived on the assignment, and course evaluations showed that the requirement of theoretical support was the most popular "new" expectation of the course. (RS)

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SPEECH COMMUNICATION ASSOCIATION

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"APPLYING THEORY TO THE CASE STUDY COURSE"

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Presented in the Program:

Communication Theories

and the

Realities of Public Relations

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"APPLYING THEORY TO THE CASE STUDY COURSE"

INTRODUCTION

A chronic problem in public relations education is the fragmentation of coursework, particularly as this fragmentation impacts on the application of communication theory.

Professionally oriented applied communication courses, i.e., oral communication, news reporting and the specialized public relations writing courses as well as various other applied courses in the use of mass media, may be cumulative and progressive in nature; for example, a basic news reporting course is usually a pre-requisite for an editing course and, perhaps for such specialized writing courses as broadcast writing.

However, undergraduate public relations curricula frequently offer one or--at best--a only few communication theory courses. Oftentimes, relatively little attention is paid to such course content's application to the professionally oriented public relations courses; too, a course in organizational communication might show little integration with another theoretical course, for example, in mass communication.

Public relations professional coursework may fare a bit better than some other professional communication areas. For example, the most popular introductory-level and intermediate-level public relations textbooks include varying, but nevertheless a fairly substantial, amount of communication theory within their pages of text.

PRESENTATION OF THEORY IS OFTEN FRAGMENTED AND SEGREGATED

Nevertheless, these textbooks' presentation of such theory is often fragmented and segregated into "theoretical" chapters and "applied" communication chapters--with little integration of communication theory within the "applied" communication chapters. Such books are two-in-one: separated into "theory" (manager) and "nuts-and-bolts" (technician) chapters.

Such fragmentation and lack of integration of theory in the public relations literature are not lost upon undergraduate students. In campaigns courses, for example, students will oftentimes totally ignore communication theory or--at best--include a theoretical reference as an afterthought in defense of any live campaign strategies they have implemented.

Even the more astute students performing formative and evaluative research in their campaigns will depend only upon empirical data from a pre-test and a post-test to indicate the success or failure of a publicity-type campaign.

Little attention will be paid to the theory that could help explain such campaigns' success or failure. Too, such campaigns oftentimes have a goal of "awareness" rather than of any change of beliefs and/or attitudes.

However, the greatest sins of such theoretical omission are probably being committed in undergraduate "case study" courses.

Kruckeberg observes:

> Taught with complacency, such a course quickly can become anecdotal in nature, ambiguous and analytically vague, and the hypothetical resolutions to case "problems" are therefore unconvincing and indefensible.
>
> Such a case study course far too easily can be taught using an overly intuitive, rigidly formulated, simplistic problem-solving process. In such a poorly taught class, the students may advocate--and the instructor may accept--hypothetical resolutions supported by little or no theory or other empirically based, nonintuitive or nonspeculative evidence.[1]

Indeed, while public relations students in a case study course may well be upper-level undergraduate students who have already taken a substantial number of the courses in their public relations curricula, they usually will rely only on a simplistic formulated process in dealing with the examination of case studies and the resolution of case problems. Kruckeberg and Starck observe the reliance upon such a formula:

> The (public relations) practice itself is most often reduced to a formulated process, at least among those providing textbook answers to public relations problems. Although authors will devise their own formulae, most adhere basically to a derivation of the RACE formula, introduced by John E. Marston in 1963. This is: Research, Action, Communication, and Evaluation.[2]

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[1]Dean Kruckeberg, "Using Case Studies in the Classroom," in Judy VanSlyke Turk (ed.), *Learning to Teach: What you Need to Know to Develop a Successful Career as a Public Relations Educator* (New York: Public Relations Society of America, 1991), 221.

[2]Dean Kruckeberg and Kenneth Starck, *Public Relations and Community: A Reconstructed Theory* (New York: Praeger, 1988), 18.

POPULAR CASE STUDY BOOKS REINFORCE FORMULATED PROBLEM-SOLVING

Popular case study books reinforce this formulated problem-solving approach in examining case studies--with little attention being paid in their brief introductory chapters to communication theory.

Hendrix, for example, advocates a thinly veiled RACE formula that he calls: research, objectives, programming and evaluation.[3] However, he provides little--if any--theoretical perspective in his introductory chapters prefacing the cases he presents.

After a hiatus of several years, I taught a Public Relations: Cases and Studies course the past two summers. First developed by another professor and me beginning in 1983 and then greatly refined over the years by yet another instructor, the course is restricted to graduating seniors. The course offers an excellent forum to apply what has been learned in other classes to "case" situations.

The course is not really an "advanced" course in the sense that a great deal of any new, higher-level content is being presented. Rather, the course is designed to allow students to apply public relations problem-solving skills that they have developed from their previous coursework.

Much of the class activity throughout the semester is peer and instructor evaluation of the work of teams who examine and study case studies primarily from a textbook. The teams orally present these cases and critically examine and evaluate the actions of the practitioners in these case studies. As part of their assignment, students must develop alternate solutions to the case problems presented in the case studies.

A popular part of the course climaxes at the end of the semester when students present their individually prepared case studies of public relations problems and campaigns that were performed by practitioners from a wide geographic area throughout the Midwest.

Initiated by the instructor who had most often taught the course these past several years, these "senior projects" are evaluated by public relations professionals, and the presentations are attended by a large number of people--oftentimes including students' parents.

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[3]Jerry A. Hendrix, *Public Relations Cases* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1992), 5.

STUDENTS HAD LITTLE APPRECIATION FOR THEORY AS A TOOL

It was my observation, however, that students were graduating from our program with little appreciation for how communication theory can be an invaluable, indeed critical, tool of professional public relations practitioners.

In the present curriculum, students are required to take either a communication research course or a communication theory course, although they are encouraged to take both. However, it was obvious that even those who had elected to take the communication theory course seemed to little appreciate the application of theory to public relations practice.

Rather, they seemed to regard the communication theory course as just that--in its most pejorative sense, i.e., a "theoretical" course that was well-taught and indeed interesting to many students, but apparently which was not perceived to be of much use in a "professional" public relations environment.

Thus, my request that students defend their recommendations for the cases with "theory" met, not so much with resistance, but rather with abject horror. Interestingly, none of the 10 students in that first summer's class had elected to take the "theory" option in their curriculum, and they were mortified that they were being asked to defend their recommendations with supporting "theory".

STUDENTS WERE ALL PREPARED TO GIVE LIP SERVICE TO 'RACE'

Rather, they were all prepared to give lip service to the RACE formula, recommending of course formative and evaluative research and then by-and-large relying on greatly intuitive "do-the-right-thing" problem-solving, together with the expected recommendation of segmentation of publics and the use of primarily traditional mass communication methods.

I gave the students an abbreviated bibliography of communication theory as well as various theoretical models; I also encouraged them to pursue other theories and theoretical models.

After the students accepted the fact that 1) I wasn't kidding and 2) the application of communication theory to case study analysis added an interesting, supportive dimension to their problem-solving recommendations, they began to enjoy the task of finding such supporting theories to lend credence to their recommendations of case study problem resolution.

STUDENTS WERE INVESTING RESEARCH TIME IN THEORETICAL INSIGHTS

Thus, students were not only researching ancillary information about specific cases, which Glen M. Broom calls "a sort of 'trivial pursuit' of public relations details" that leaves them with a collection of descriptive details, but with little abstract knowledge that will apply in future situations.[4]

Rather, they were investing their research time, their problem-solving efforts and their interaction with their peers within the classroom in providing theoretical insights that helped them to understand the cases at hand as well as applications for future cases and public relations problems that they would encounter in their professional careers.

These students, who--as noted--had not had a communication theory course and who as typical undergraduates tended to disregard any theoretical references within their public relations literature and from their professors, did well--but not extremely well--in their application of theory.

I was relatively nonjudgmental and noncritical in my evaluation of their attempts, partly to bolster their confidence and partly because of the nature of case study work.

The students tended to rely to a great extent on the diffusion and adoption of innovation literature, which generally was appropriate and was applied well.

No fools, they also relied overly much so on the Kruckeberg and Starck theoretical model of public relations, which is based on the theoretical work of the Chicago School of Social Thought. They used systems theory relatively little, nor did they apply a range of other theoretical models that would have lended themselves to the cases being examined.

The past summer's class of 21 students included several who had taken a communication theory course. Apparently warned about what to expect, they exhibited curiosity more than fear. I told them not to expect that "Mr. Manners/Dr. Feelgood" public relations solutions would suffice in their case studies and that nice guys were relatively common and not necessarily competent public relations practitioners.

Rather, the students would have to make recommendations about the case studies that were supported by theory.

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[4]Glen M. Broom, San Diego State University, to Dean Kruckeberg, University of Northern Iowa, 11 March 1991, Transcript in the hand of Dean Kruckeberg.

The students thrived on the assignment, and the course evaluations showed that this was the most popular "new" expectation of the course. Too, the students came up with a range of theories that I had never before considered in support of their case study recommendations, and I admit to having learned a great deal myself in hearing the students' case recommendations. Interestingly, this class relied to a great extent on systems theory.

Integrating theory within a case study course should hardly rank as a great innovation, but perhaps not enough of us are doing so. Of those who are, we perhaps are not being sufficiently demanding in our expectation of the use of such theory to defend case study recommendations.